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JURY RETURN CRITICAL VERDICT ON PRISON SERVICE CARE FOR VULNERABLE WOMAN

The jury at the inquest into the death of Louise Davies at HMP New Hall in 2004 has returned a critical verdict questioning the appropriateness of prison for vulnerable women.

Louise Davies, aged 32, died in the segregation unit of the prison on 18 April 2004 whilst serving a sentence for arson, an offence related to an attempt to self harm. She had a long history of mental health problems and was a prolific self-harmer. At the time of her death she was the subject of the prison's suicide watch procedures as she posed an immediate risk to herself. On the day of her death officers spoke to Louise after an apparent suicide note was found outside her cell door. Later at 7.21pm she was found unconscious with a ligature around her neck, but despite Louise's condition prison staff did not raise the alarm immediately as they felt the situation was not an emergency. Louise never regained consciousness and was pronounced dead at 7.45pm.

The inquest heard how Louise had been deemed 'untreatable' and therefore could not be sectioned under the present Mental Health Act. As a result the jury recognised that "there was no other option...but [for Louise] to go to prison". The judge in the criminal case said Louise should be sent to prison where he believed that she could receive "constant supervision and monitoring". However, after hearing the levels of training provided to staff on mentally ill prisoners and hearing detailed evidence on the regime for such prisoners, the inquest jury concluded in their verdict that "...this environment is unsuitable for someone with Louise's problems as the constant supervision and monitoring she required was lacking in the prison environment".

Louise's family said:

"We still believe that mental health services let down Louise which resulted in prison for her being inevitable. For us the jury made it quite clear that prison was not the appropriate place for her."

Deborah Coles, Co-director of INQUEST said:

"While the government continues to send women to prison they will continue to die. We hope that this case will inform Baroness Corston's review of vulnerable women in prison which we hope will make strong recommendations resulting in the diversion of such women away from the criminal justice system."

Fiona Borrill, the family's solicitor added:

“The government urgently needs to address the issue of women with mental health problems being inappropriately placed in prison which can not meet their needs.”

The family were represented at the inquest by barrister Mark George from Garden Court North Chambers, Manchester, instructed by INQUEST Lawyer’s Group member Fiona Borrill of Lester Morrill Solicitors, Leeds.

Notes to editors:

The narrative verdict in full:

“At 1921hrs on 18 April 2004 Louise Davies was discovered in cell 10 on the segregation unit at HMP New Hall with a ligature around her neck. The time of death was recorded as 1945. The jury has decided by a majority of 8 -2 that Louise strangled herself but did not intend to die.

We agreed with the diagnosis of Louise Davies’ condition as being ‘untreatable’. However this meant that there were no other options for the crime of arson she committed but to go to prison. We feel that this environment is unsuitable for someone with Louise’s problems as the constant supervision and monitoring she required was lacking in the prison environment.”

Louise Davies participated in the television documentary series *The Real Bad Girls*. In the episode focussing on Louise filmed at HMP Bullwood Hall which was viewed by the inquest jury, her vulnerable mental state and self-harming behaviour was clearly evident, as was the difficulty prison staff had in helping her. She is shown preparing to move from Bullwood Hall three weeks before her death as it was felt HMP New Hall was better able to provide the support she required.

For further statistical information on deaths of women in prison please visit www.inquest.org.uk

INQUEST is the only non-governmental organisation in England and Wales that works directly with the families of those who die in custody. It provides an independent free legal and advice service to bereaved people on inquest procedures and their rights in the coroner’s courts.

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